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The Covid-19 pandemic's impact on migrants' decision to return home to Latvia¹

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The Covid-19 pandemic restricted people's movement but also changed their course of life. For some migrants, this meant re-evaluating opportunities abroad and back home. This paper uses findings from interviews with those who returned to Latvia during the pandemic to gain insight into the ways the pandemic influenced their decision to return. We find that the pandemic impacted how people think of return. It was both a reason and a catalyst, accelerating life events and leading to decisions to return. For some who contemplated return the pandemic accelerated decision, motivated by missing people, loneliness, and missing community. The pandemic and its immediate consequences also directly affected migrants; livelihood and work; some returned quickly. For some of these migrants, the pandemic also acted as a barrier to leaving again soon after a return. Circular migration journeys of coming back and leaving again feed into the narrative that for many migrants returning is more a stop in their journey than the destination itself. The much anticipated great wave of return, it seems was more like a tide. People moved back and forth between borders, seeking safety and community in times of uncertainty while trying to maintain their work and studies.

Keywords: Latvia, return migration, Covid-19, reasons for return, decision to return

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Introduction

Latvia experienced the high rate of depopulation in the first decade of the 2000s[1]. Migration was a key contributor; after the accession to the European Union, Latvians increasingly opted for opportunities abroad [2]. Attracting return migrants has been a priority for policymakers and businesses in Latvia, as in other countries that joined the European Union after 2004 [3]. Return migration has been linked to increase in entrepreneurship [4] and brain gain, investment, and skill transfer by return migrants [5]. In recent year, only a third of emigration is return migration [6] and the government launched messaging campaigns and support initiatives including grants and dedicated coordinators to assist with return and resettlement [7, 8].

What makes people return is a key question to design effective policies, especially returnees reasons to migrate back differs from that of other voluntary migrants. Family reasons and seeking growth weigh more than economic reasons for returnees [9, 10]. This is the case for Latvia also, homesickness, patriotism and family were found to be the most important reasons for returning to the homeland [11, 12, 13]. At the same time, seeking opportunities for a better lifestyle [14] or entrepreneurship [4] also influenced returnees' decision-making.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many popular theories circulated about how the pandemic could impact migration and return migration. Some speculated that return migration will increase since Latvians will want to be home during these difficult times, others feared that all forms of migration will come to a halt due to borders closing. Migration flows decreased due to travel restrictions and border closures [15]. Efforts to attract and support returns intensified [16].

At least temporarily the world has changed: there were more restrictions, life seemed to have slowed for many, and unemployment across Europe soared. At the same time, barriers to mobility increased. As countries closed their borders, many feared staying abroad or could not leave home again. Migration to Latvia dropped, and almost half of the migrants to Latvia were Latvian nationals [15].

Because it is a recent phenomenon, understanding migrants' narratives of return is still lacking. In this paper we explore how did the Covid-19 pandemic influence Latvian return migrants' decision to return. Rather than generalising, we seek to understand the influence of the pandemic on return, considering existing knowledge on reasons to return. Based on the interviews we argue that for some the pandemic acted as catalyst, speeding up the time between contemplating a return to the decision; while for others it triggered an immediate decision.

1 Background

1.1 Why do migrants return?

Studies conducted in recent decades show that decisions of return migration vary. Push and pull factors to a large degree explain why people migrate and how they choose where to [17]. However, return migration differs from other forms of migration not only in that people return to a place known to them. Thus, the reasons for return differ also.

Attachment to host and home countries matters [18], yet they are not mutually exclusive [19, 20]. Strong social ties in the home country, opportunities, family, and motivations related to one's identity such as longing for home are determinants of return intentions [21] but so is failure in the host country [22]. What increases the intention not to return is work, education, and job satisfaction [21, 23, 24, 25]. For return migrants, social ties and families play an even greater role than in other forms of migration, while economic factors matter less [26, 27, 28, 10]. Stark's mapping of reasons for return migration provides one of the most comprehensive lists of reasons for return in recent literature and includes economic reasons, growth and one's place in society, and family reasons [29]. These motivations and reasons interact and result in complex decisions and analyses [18].

Latvian returnees' reasons for return align with reasons for return in other studies. The main factors that influence return migration to Latvia are homesickness, patriotism, and family ties [11, 30]. Latvia pro-actively sought to help its citizens return and integrate

into society, with new policies, laws and messaging as well as with support from remigration coordinators in all regions (e.g.: Migration Policy Conception, Diaspora law). In a recent study, coordinators discussed the complexity of reasons for return but agreed that patriotism and family were the two most important factors for Latvians when deciding to return [11]. For young Latvians the main reasons for return were homesickness, taking care of family, and wanting their children to grow up in the home country [29]. The reason for return is rarely economic [12, 13]. Failure is a theme, and unsuccessful integration in the host country also contributes to return [12]. Professional factors count; these include applying skills learned abroad [11], and starting a business [4]. Skills learned abroad however are not always acknowledged by employers [31] and even if they are considered it is mainly so in the capital, Riga [32]. Life events such as starting a family, and professional opportunities expedited such return intentions and turned them into a decision to return [14]. Younger diaspora return migrants seek a better life in Latvia [33]. For them, the return may not be the end of their migration journey but part of the seeking new opportunities and experiences [26]. But what happens during a crisis like the pandemic when life as we know it pauses in many ways? What are the reasons for returning then? In this paper, we ask not only how the pandemic influenced decisions to return but also what the reasons for return were.

These reasons do not come at once; in fact, migrants often think about belonging, ideas of the self and homeland, often juxtaposed with life abroad. Voluntary migration is not an immediate process for the individual, and decisions do not take place on a uniform schedule due to the complexity of feelings, thoughts, and factors. Instead, migration definitions can be described in three phases. First, they are considered, then planned, and finally executed [34, 35, 36, 37]. While many migrants go through the first two stages, it is in the last one that arrangements facilitating return are made. Often, the gap between considering mobility and actual mobility is large, some may consider returning for a long time but never return [38, 39, 40]. Preparedness to return refers both to their

willingness to return and their readiness to return [22]. How the Covid-19 pandemic impacted these phases for Latvian returnees has not been explored in detail yet.

1.2 Pandemic's impact on migration

The Covid-19 pandemic is a relatively recent crisis. As a result, published studies remain limited. It impacted so many aspects of people's social, economic, and personal lives. Migration too was an impacted area. The pandemic, with lockdowns, restrictions and border closures increased the immobility of populations from one moment to another [41]. This was recognized by policymakers; the Latvian governments' efforts to reach and attract back Latvians intensified during the pandemic [16]. The efforts acknowledged the diversity of the diaspora [7, 8].

At the beginning of the pandemic, there were assisted returns when the government helped those abroad to come home. As economies shrunk, unemployment grew. This was especially relevant for the service sector and temporary employment, areas where many migrants work in. Migrants globally faced economic problems, not only losing employment but sometimes not being paid for the work they completed [42, 43, 44].

Understanding changes in one's lives may be a way to understand migration more during the pandemic. During the pandemic, health, employment, and social life changed [45, 46]. Changes in one part of one's life often lead to changes in other parts of life, and trajectories also [47, 48, 49]. Exploring the role of life events and changes has been used to study mobility and return migrants' journeys [50, 51, 52, 53, 54]. Examples of such life stages include caring duties such as having school-aged children or elderly parents [53] or family planning [55, 56]. Yet in migration decisions, identity formation, access to the labour market, or feelings for the 'homeland' still play a role [53]. Thus, family, professional and historical reasons are layered upon each other [47, 57]. The decision is then made prompted by a change, or rather transition in one's life [58]. The pandemic brought many changes in people's lives, including new caring duties, or professional crossroads.

While life changed during the pandemic, demand in certain sectors did not. A recent article by Paul highlights that for many EU13 migrants' opportunities remained as they were in high demand for agricultural and service sector jobs abroad [59]. In Europe, when restrictions were the strictest, government negotiations led to exceptions that allowed CEE migrants to fill essential positions abroad to avoid a food crisis. Migrants also proactively returned when they could to their jobs abroad [59]. Thus, return migration was often short-lived for CEE migrants, many returning abroad to work. Return migration was closely linked to other areas of life seemingly fast-tracked by the pandemic, such as hybrid and remote work. For Slovenian migrants considering return combining working online and living at home, with a higher quality of life was a significant factor [42].

Hybrid or remote work increasingly made lifestyle migration, for instance earning a Western European salary but settling in CEE, possible. This was already a consideration for Estonian migrants before the pandemic [54]. Moving abroad, or returning are also not singular events but part of their migration journey. In this sense, transitional migrants, migrants continually negotiate their identities between home and host countries, maintaining strong links to their home communities [22] Thus, brain circulation, repeat, and circular migration better describe migration flows than the limited dual point A to B dynamic [26].

However, the ways reasons for the return and people's decision making to migrate back to Latvia may have changed during the pandemic have not been explored, there are no current studies on return migration on Covid-19 in Latvia.

2 Methods

We conducted 74 in-depth interviews with return migrants in the three Baltic countries between 2018-2022 to find out more about their thoughts on migration, reasons for return, and life upon return. This article is based on part of this dataset, 12 interviews conducted with Latvian return migrants who returned during the Covid-19 pandemic.

For this study, we use the definition of a return migrant as someone who spent at least three months abroad and then returned to their home country, in line with similar research in the Baltics [60].

The interviews were a mix of face-to-face, phone, or video conferences. Most interviews were conducted in Latvian. The interviews were semi-structured. In interviews, all returnees were asked about their migration background, return journey, resettlement, and plans for the future. Interviewees come from different professions, regions, age groups, ethnicity, and gender. Since the population and most companies in Latvia are centered in Riga and major regional centres, these make up the majority of locations.

Potential interviewees were contacted after searching on registers and social networks (LinkedIn), personal networks of the research team, and employment networks. There was also an opportunity to register on the research projects' website if someone was interested in being interviewed.

All potential interviewees received information on the research and consented to the interviews. Interviews were recorded, and anonymous and all interviewees received pseudonyms. The analytical approach was thematic, looking for patterns and relationships between them. The sample is not representative, but it captures perceptions of returnees in these two years about how they see the reasons for returning to their home country, Latvia.

3 Results

This section presents two different ways the pandemic was weaved into returnees' narratives of return. For each pattern, we not only discuss the way the pandemic influenced returns but also how this influence was connected to the main reasons to return in participants' stories.

3.1 Pandemic as a catalyst

This group of returnees in the sample have been thinking about return, but they have not thought of the specifics of when. This staged approach aligns with different stages of migration decision, first contemplated and only finally realized [14].

As borders, public spaces, and workplaces shut down some returnees still living abroad, and living alone described feelings of loneliness and missing people. The pandemic and the restrictions had an even bigger impact on those living alone or being isolated from society [61, 62, 63]. Migrants, who did not have family abroad or who did not (yet) integrate into the host society relatively fully faced challenges of loneliness [64, 65]. Contrasting being able to interact with people daily in isolation, some migrants chose to return to be with family. Rita described how the pandemic influenced her decision to return: *“I spent several months in Geneva home alone. In the beginning, I enjoyed it, but the more it lasted, the less I liked it. I understood that actually I would like to be in Latvia. I had the feeling that the pandemic won’t disappear from a to another and that it will begin again in autumn. And I thought that I would not like to be again home alone. I preferred to be in Latvia“* (Rita). Rita only recently arrived in Geneva and felt increasingly isolated. She contrasted her isolation with the opportunities she would have for socialising in Latvia. Edgars felt the same way, he did not want to ‘hermit abroad’ especially since he never thought of not returning. *“Well because one of the reasons is Latvia is the place I want to stay and that was just a source of higher income. That was in no way a long-term situation. So that’s why I really didn’t feel like a returning migrant. I just returned home”* (Edgars).

Other returnees reflected on whether they would rather stay abroad during the pandemic. Latvia did comparatively well especially at the beginning of the pandemic when much of Western Europe was in a strict lockdown. Thus, migrants saw opportunities to live without isolation, work and even find new opportunities. Sandis retrospectively argued *“I am happy that in our country it is more or less well... If I would be abroad now, I would definitely would like to come home.”* (Sandis). As the pandemic continued, these

differences evaporated somewhat. By 2020 autumn Latvia too was in lockdown. Yet, migrants' feelings of loneliness did not disappear though became more of the status quo. The decision to return was not always with permanence in mind. Edgars too came home but was able to continue his work remotely. His initial plan of coming back for a short time only was extended repeatedly and he now thinks he returned for good: *“Well, there was a chance I could work online and move back to Latvia. The main reason was that I didn't know how long the border closings would last. In the beginning, I was thinking of staying there during Covid-19. But as rumors of border closings were shuffling and the duration would be unknown, I didn't want to hermit there for a few years... The positive was also that I got back to Latvia and met my family and friends and don't regret the decision.”* (Edgars). Toms, who moved abroad to start an enterprise had to return quickly. These feelings, and the opportunity to return, played out against the backdrop of having thought of return before. For these migrants, the pandemic facilitated or rather sped up the decision to return. At the core of the reasons, such missing people and the home country align with the reasons in literature before the pandemic. However, loneliness and longing intensified and catalysed the decision-making process from contemplation to action.

3.2 Pandemic as a reason to return

For the second group of returnees, the pandemic had such a direct impact on their livelihood, work, or studies that they returned without contemplating returning significantly before that. This was primarily true at the beginning of the pandemic when the economy halted.

Unemployment across Europe soared at the beginning of the crisis with the most impacted sector being the service sector. As the world shot down, people lost their roles. Since CEE migrants filled many service sector jobs in Western Europe, they were disproportionately impacted. For migrants not having a job resulted not only in stress but also in economic difficulties. For Una and her family, the pandemic also meant losing their jobs, which

prompted them to return quickly, they moved from consideration to execution within days: *“Things are closing there and so on, like one of the bookshops that I worked in. And my husband's job kind of closed. We had a flight on March 26th”* (Una). Una felt they had no choice but to return as life abroad without income was more expensive. Her family’s decision was made quickly.

Students studying abroad faced a unique dilemma. As their studies shifted online, social life came to an abrupt halt. Anna, who studied in the Netherlands quickly decided to return to Latvia, on the second to last repatriation flight when the pandemic hit. *“It was the 25th of March, just when all that situation started. There were a lot of people flying to Latvia. Honestly, the majority were students who were studying abroad. From the ones I know, rarely anyone stayed. I know that in the beginning, I thought I would stay in the Netherlands myself but then I realised that they are closing borders and everything, then I got the feeling “Oh Shit, it’s getting real”* (Anna). Anna then spent the next two years flying back for exams or when studies were on-site, only to be in quarantine or self-isolation for weeks on end. Often, these trips would be decided from one day to the other since changing restrictions left little time for planning. In the end, she did not return to the Netherlands but stayed in Latvia despite previous plans:

For some who left quickly, and without planning it before, the pandemic also acted as a barrier. Returnees contemplated leaving again, but they couldn’t leave. Una, who had to return because she and her husband’s job ended during the pandemic was waiting for the earliest opportunity for the borders open to leave *“All the borders are closed until the end of July... I hope that the situation will change until January.”* (Una). For students, this often became costly, especially as modes of studies, regulations, and flights changed from one day to the other. *“Then I returned to the Netherlands for an exam...the next day we received an email that said: “If you live abroad, you can stay in your home countries and not go to the Netherlands. Don’t worry, the exam will be held online.” And then I thought “damn, wtf”. The thing is I couldn’t immediately fly back (to Latvia) because I would have to do another Covid test. It was expensive and tickets were expensive for the last*

moment flights. Then I was stuck in the Netherlands writing a test and after a month they stated that all studies are going online again. All are bad. Go back (to home country)” (Anna). Toms, who moved to Spain three months before the pandemic hit Europe to start a business drove back 120 km per hour across Europe once he realized borders are closing. He then left again only to realise the second wave is there *“And then the second wave hit. And then we realised we couldn’t predict how long this one will last. Either we head back to Latvia now or we stay and just run out of money. So, we decided to head back before zeros and not with debt”* (Toms). He returned with a positive balance sheet and stayed in Latvia. The feeling of being stuck therefore can be described not only as a one-off experience but a reoccurring frustration for migrants moving back and forth between home and abroad.

For this group of migrants, who returned early in the pandemic, what they do every day was not an option. Thus, they decided to move back to Latvia quickly. They also started to contemplate leaving Latvia quickly. However, the environment remained uncertain as lockdowns, quarantines and regulations changed. Leaving was not easy and costly in terms of time and funds also.

4 Conclusions and Discussion

A few recent events had a larger impact on people’s lifestyles, relationships, or even jobs than the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper aimed to answer the question of how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced Latvian migrants’ decision to return to Latvia. While searching for the reason for return, we found that returnees’ decision-making process, consideration, planning, and execution were impacted. Interviews reveal that the pandemic’s influence may be described in two ways.

Firstly, for a group of participants, the pandemic was a catalyst allowing migrants to move from contemplating a return to returning quickly. The pandemic impacted how people thought of return. For them, missing people, loneliness, and missing community were some of the main reasons for their return. These reasons are about social ties and home,

very much aligning to reasons Latvians migrated home during the pandemic. The return journey of this group of migrants highlights not only the vulnerability of migrants in times of crisis but also re-emphasises the importance of integration for successful migration journeys. Integration and strong social ties provide resilience in times of crisis. At the same time, it is an example of how the gap between considering mobility and mobility shrunk when faced with a crisis, uncertainty, and isolation abroad.

Secondly, the pandemic and its immediate consequences may be seen as reasons for return. For this group of returnees, loss of employment and online studies were the most significant reason. Yet, there is no sense that these experiences are linked to failure, often sighted as a reason to return. Instead, they are rooted in uncertainty and a need for safety. These returnees moved quickly. For some of these migrants, the pandemic also acted as a barrier to leaving again soon after a return. Circular migration journeys of coming back and leaving again, feed into the narrative that for many migrants returning is more a stop in their journey than the destination itself.

The much-anticipated great wave of return, it seems was more like a tide. People moved back and forth between borders, seeking safety and community in times of uncertainty while trying to maintain their work and studies. Yet, lessons can be learned from this experience.

It was migrants living alone, who contemplated return prior to the pandemic who decided to return and stayed. This highlights not only the vulnerability of migrants abroad but also the importance of the consideration phase. In this consideration phase policymakers wishing to attract returnees have the opportunity to remind and emphasise migrants about the opportunities and values of the home country which then can play a large role in the decision to return.

For these transnational migrants returning and leaving again, coming back is not an end point. They successfully maintained links to both their home and host country, and what attracted them to leave remains valid even in times of crisis.

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